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Why I Write

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Panel: Why I Write...

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Siobhan Ni Shíthigh

Why I Write

I begin by telling you briefly about my background as this will help to put my writing in context.

I was born in the southwest corner of Ireland where there is a very distinct culture that has produced many works of literature and about which many scholarly books have been written. This culture is in a direct line to the Celtic past and beyond. At one time the Celtic world stretched from Asia Minor across Europe and its western limit was the island of Ireland. Over time the Celts became extinct but their culture—the Gaelic interpretation of it—survived on the western seaboard.

I grew up in a Gaelic-speaking household. This language is my mother tongue and I choose to write in it. My writing is generally experimental, it is based on experience, on memory, on imagination and also on events observed that draw from me an emotive response, a feeling of wonder, delight, compassion or loss.

I see life as mystery—it cannot be explained but it is experienced and this experience can be expressed. Expression takes many forms. Creative expression has its own singular form, that is to say it has a life force of its own, it is a living form and speaks on many levels. One can say that it is universal, that it pertains to the human experience. Expression can also be viewed as a quest for meaning. Memory is linked to imagination and is a powerful tool in the invention of the self.

Emotion follows thought, emotion is felt in the body, creative impulses come from the heart; it is therefore important for me to be in touch with my being, to foster an awareness of observed reality and to foster silence. When I make a conscious decision to write on an emotive response that I have experienced, I do not write on it immediately. I surrender it to my subconscious mind, I internalize it and I wait. Yes, I wait until I hear it and then I write it bringing my reason to bear on it—that is, I use certain forms of crafting that are known to me. On occasion I have heard the last line, and some works have come to me spontaneously.

As I come from a very strong literary culture—one that stretches back beyond pre-Christian times—I am influenced by the heroic tales of that period. “The White Flag Stones”, a long poem translated by Thomas Mc Carthy, has layers of meaning. In our literature we have epic poems and sagas. The pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne is a saga. In this tale Grainne is betrothed to a man called Fionn who is much older than her. At a feast to celebrate the betrothal she falls in love with a young hero called Diarmuid. The couple flees from Tara, and Fionn and his band pursue them. They face many perils in their flight from Fionn—their resting places are known all over Ireland and pointed out as the beds of Diarmuid and Grainne. Diarmuid is eventually wounded by a boar. Fionn

and his band arrive to find him bleeding to death. Diarmuid appeals to Fionn to save him by giving him a drink of water from his cupped hands. Fionn moves three times to do this, but each time lets the water spill through his fingers.

I grew up with these tales; storytelling is an important cultural vehicle in Irish life. These tales open up a fantastic world in which no distinction is drawn between the natural and the supernatural. Nature can be seen as hostile and its forces kept at bay only by heroic deeds supported by faith in God. Then again, especially in early Gaelic poetry, there is a profound belief in the kinship of man and nature. Through these tales moral and cultural values were conveyed in an unconsciously artistic form. George Thomson has pointed out the similarities between early Gaelic literature and Homeric poetry. Among these are the use of ornamental epithets and set passages repeated without variation to describe recurrent situations, such as setting out on a journey, preparing for battle or partaking of a meal.

The chief glory of ancient Irish literature is its nature poetry—these are short lyrics with a succession of images where there is no sustained description of any scene. Some scholars believe that Irish nature poetry is derived from druidical rites connected with the seasons. The following lyric dates from the 9th century.

I bring you news
The stag is lowing.
Winter descends.
Summer is gone.
The wind is high and cold.
The sun is low,
Short his course.
The sea is rising.
The bracken has turned red,
Its shape is hidden.
The wild goose has
Raised its wonted cry.
The cold has gripped
The bird's wings.
Season of ice.
That is my news.

In 1893 the Gaelic League was founded—its aim was to revive the language together with other forms of Irish culture. Its founder was Douglas Hyde, who later became the first President of

the Irish Republic. The Gaelic League became a source of inspiration for Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory, which in turn led to a literary renaissance.

There is also a flowering of literature in the Irish language in our modern state. This happens along with all the structures that support the language in education, the media, sport, music and culture in general, which help to make our society unique. I am pleased to be a part of this and to remind myself of what Shelley said, that there is one great poem—the great poem of the universe.